

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
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INFO USICA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 1 OF 2 SEOUL 3337

E.O. 11652: N/A
SUBJECT: "ROOTS" KOREAN REACTION TO TV SERIES

SUMMARY: HUGE AUDIENCES VIEWED TV VERSION "ROOTS" ON TONGYANG
BROADCASTING (TBC) IN SEOUL AND PUSAN IN MARCH. TBC CLAIMS
75 PERCENTS TV AUDIENCE SAW ALL OR PART OF SERIES. REACTION
GENERALLY SYMPATHETIC AND PROGRAM SEEN AS DRAMATIZATION
UNIVERSAL HUMAN CONDITION, STRIVING THROUGH SUFFERING TOWARDS
BETTER LIFE. SUBSTANTIAL MINORITY FELT SERIES GAVE NEGATIVE
IMPRESSION U.S.-END SUMMARY.

1. LARGE PERCENTAGE TV VIEWERS BOTH SEOUL AND PUSAN SAW ALL
OR PART TBC'S BROADCAST ROOTS SERIES THOUGH NO SCIENTIFIC
POLL EXISTS TO ESTABLISH FIRM FIGURES. LESS CLEAR IS WHETHER
SERIES HAD ANY SIGNIFICANT LASTING IMPACT ON VIEWERS. MANY
SPOKE EMPHATICALLY OF EMOTIONAL EFFECT SERIES HAD ON THEM,
OTHERS FELT EITHER THAT DRAMA PROVIDED ENTERTAINMENT WITH
LITTLE OR NO ATTITUDINAL CARRYOVER OR THAT SERIES JUST ANOTHER
"AMERICAN WESTERN", OR INTEREST BECAUSE PROTAGONISTS BLACK
AND SHOWS DEALT WITH AREA OF AMERICAN HISTORY NOT GENERALLY
FAMILIAR TO KOREANS. CHOSUN ILBO (3/31/78), IN COLUMN TITLED
"SHALLOW ROOTS", COMMENTED, "ALL NEGROES IN THE DRAMA ARE
GOOD, HONEST AND BRAVE; ALL WHITE PEOPLE APPEARING IN ROOTS
ARE MEAN AND MERCILESS VILLAINS. IT IS A TYPICAL AMERICAN
METHOD OF DISTINGUISHING 'GOOD GUYS' AND BIG'BAD GUYS'.
THE BBC PRODUCTION 'SLAVE SHIP' IS MUCH BETTER...AS FAR AS
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PRESENTATION OF PROBLEMS AND PURSUIT OF TRUTH." LEE DUCK-
BYUNG, TRANSLATOR OF BOOK, ROOTS, FOUND TV VERSION "RATHER
DULL" BUT ADMITTED "MAYBE IT IS BECAUSE I AM SO STRONGLY ATTACHED
TO THE NOVEL..." (HANKUK ILBO, 4/4/78). NUMBER ACADEMICS
AND LITERATI AGREED DRAMATIC PRESENTATION WAS SENSATIONAL
BUT WOULD HAVE LITTLE LASTING EFFECT, AND FELT BOOK MIGHT
CREATE MORE LASTING IMPRESSION. (CURRENTLY ABOUT 12 DIFFERENT

KOREAN EDITIONS OF ROOTS IN PRINT, AND LITERARY MAGAZINE
MUNHAK SASANG HAS SERIALIZED IT. BEFORE SHOWING, AN ESTIMATED
150,000 COPIES BOOK HAD BEEN SOLD, AND SINCE SHOWING, ABOUT
35,000 COPIES HAVE BEEN SOLD, SALES LEVEL IN BEST
SELLER CATEGORY FOR KOREA.

3. OTHERS FELT PROGRAMS IMPORTANT, AND LEFT NEGATIVE IMPRESSION
AMERICA AS RACIST COUNTRY FILLED VIOLENCE AND BIGOTRY.
A LEADING POETESS, REMARKED SERIES LED VIEWERS TO BELIEVE
RACIAL SITUATION IN AMERICA MUCH MORE SERIOUS THAN THEY IMAGINED
AND ALSO SAID TIMING BROADCAST UNFORTUNATE IN THAT AMERICAN
MORALITY ALREADY UNDER ATTACK IN KOREA. OTHERS SEEM TO AGREE:
COLLEGE STUDENT IN PUSAN ASKED "HOW COULD THOSE WHITE MEN
BE PROUD OF THEIR DEMOCRACY WHICH PERMITTED THIS KIND OF SYSTEM
(SLAVERY) AT THAT TIME?"
SEVERAL KOREANS HAVE COMMENTED THAT ROOTS MADE MOCKERY PRESIDENT
CARTER'S HUMAN RIGHTS STANCE.

4. ON WHOLE, HOWEVER, IMPACT OF SHOW SEEMS POSITIVE. MANY
KOREANS, PARTICULARLY OLDER KOREANS, SAID THEY UNDERSTOOD
PAIN AND HUMILIATION BLACK PEOPLE EXPERIENCED AS SLAVE,
SINCE KOREA HAD HAD SIMILAR EXPERIENCE UNDER JAPANESE.

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THEY FELT SHOW, WHILE GIVING INSIGHT INTO BLACK HISTORY AND
CULTURE, DEPICTED UNIVERSAL HUMAN CONDITION, AS PROF. CHUNG
IL-MONG OF HANYANG U. WROTE IN HANKUK ILBO: "IT SEEMS TO BE
BECAUSE OF THE CRYING FOR FREEDOM, THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN
VALUE, RATHER THAN THE DEPICTION OF WHITE CRUELTY OR BLACK
PEOPLE'S SUFFERINGS THAT THE DRAMA ROOTS HAS DRAWN SYMPATHY
EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD."

5. A NOTED WRITER AND DISSIDENT IN CONVERSATION WITH MISSION

OFFICERS, ALSO SPOKE OF "UNIVERSALITY" THE DRAMA; HE SAID VIEWER DIDN'T THINK IN TERMS BLACK AND WHITE WHILE WATCHING, BUT RATHER IN TERMS MAN'S DIGNITY AND HARDSHIPS, COMMON STRUGGLE ALL MEN. HE MENTIONED, BY WAY ILLUSTRATION, KOREAN CHILDREN ACTING OUT "ROOTS" STORY IN GAMES, AND KUNTA KINTE HAS BECOME POPULAR HERO TO THEM.

6. SOME THOUGHTFUL OBSERVERS ALSO NOTED U.S. WILLINGNESS TO DRAMATIZE AND BROADCAST AMERICAN PREJUDICE REFLECTED PRINCIPLE DEMOCRATIC SELF-CRITICISM, OPENNESS AND SELF-REFORM.

7. MOST COMMENTS MADE BY MISSION CONTACTS WERE ALONG THESE LINES, AND IT SEEMS FAIR TO SAY KOREANS FELT PROGRAMS ILLUMINATED BLACK HISTORY AND CULTURE, AND GAVE THEM NEW SYMPATHY BLACK AMERICANS AND AFRICANS AS PEOPLE WITH WHOM KOREANS HAD SHARED SIMILAR EXPERIENCE OF BONDAGE AND SUFFERING.

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